



Pulling IT Together

Agencies take an integrated approach to service delivery.

By Steve Towns - January 2002

When the California Department of Motor Vehicles began moving transactions to the Internet last year, it was just the start of a broader effort to improve how the massive agency interacts with the state's millions of drivers.

Under a project dubbed "DMV of the Future," the agency held a series of stakeholder meetings to get a better idea of what citizens wanted. It also met with some of private industry's most respected companies to learn their secrets to customer satisfaction. The goal, according to state officials, is to refashion how the DMV conducts all of its business, regardless of whether citizens contact the agency online, over the telephone or in person.

"Just putting a new application on the Internet isn't going to revolutionize the way the DMV does business. You've also got to change the way the retail operation works and the way that people deal with customers face to face," said Steve Nissen, former director of the Governor's Office for Innovation in Government, an organization charged with improving customer service throughout California government. "From that will flow more coherent approaches to telephone service centers and integrating mail with telephone, with Internet and with over-the-counter services."

Nissen's office worked with the DMV to arrange visits for DMV workers to Southwest Airlines, Disneyland, Nordstrom and Standard Oil. Another 20 companies traveled to DMV offices to give presentations.

"The companies are basically imparting their experiences and how they would approach designing the DMV from their customer-service perspective. State employees rarely get an opportunity to hear this," Nissen said. "We're looking at changing behavior at the state bureaucracy level, so that all of the customer-service initiatives -- whether its high-tech like e-government or simple over-the-counter -- serve the customer better."

Solving the Puzzle

Comprehensive approaches to improving service delivery remain rare in government organizations, said J. Paul Doty, chief operating officer for GovConnect, a Cincinnati-based e-government firm. He said public agencies routinely fail to tightly integrate Web, interactive voice response (IVR), call centers and other service delivery channels.

Doty contends that agencies must view Web-based applications as one piece of a larger service-delivery puzzle. "Historically, and to some extent today, there is this isolationism that occurs over whatever the hot technology is. So when governments set up e-government initiatives, the



prevailing winds are Web-based," he said.

Agencies can broaden the reach of online initiatives by closely coupling them with IVR and call center operations, he said. "They should be coming in with multimedia solutions that really try to do service reengineering. If the objective is to use technology for the purpose of improving service and access to government, they need to do that through as many vehicles as they have at their disposal. Not too often does one tool fix every issue."

Integrated service delivery has been a key to success for the Minnesota Department of Revenue (DOR), which worked with GovConnect to create an electronic tax filing and payment system that accommodates both Web and telephone transactions. The application is closely linked to a call center staffed with DOR employees ready to lead taxpayers through the electronic filing process.

Members of the call center staff can stay on the line with taxpayers as they work their way through the telephone filing system, said Juli Peterson, DOR's project manager for the electronic filing implementation. "On the Web it's the same thing," she added. "We have a feature that allows our employees to talk customers through screen by screen while they are seeing it. That's been very beneficial."

Market research collected before the new system was installed warned the agency that although taxpayers would welcome electronic filing, they also would demand a high degree of support. "One of the things that came back pretty resoundingly was that our taxpayers wanted their hands held in a new process like this," Peterson said. "So we knew that we were going to be dealing with a lot of calls."

Close coordination between DOR's tax processing applications, the GovConnect-hosted tax-filing Web site and the DOR-operated call center is vital to delivering the service that taxpayers expect. Therefore, DOR and GovConnect created an interface that allows taxpayer data to flow between the agency and contractor on demand via the Internet.

"We had to build a whole process to get information to GovConnect from our legacy system in a live mode. That was something I don't think anyone else had ever done to this level," Peterson said. "There isn't any of the batch processing that you normally see in these hosted arrangements."

The system, now known as e-File Minnesota, began operating on July 1 for sales, withholding and several other business taxes -- eliminating the option of filing paper returns for those tax types. As of early October, the system had processed nearly 270,000 electronic returns and taxpayers were reacting favorably.

"We are getting a significant number of positive e-mails thanking us and telling us how good it



is," said DOR Assistant Commissioner Richard Alman. "It's been very gratifying to see the response because [taxpayers] do think it's better than what they had before."

Planning the Future

The California DMV hopes for similar results from its DMV of the Future initiative. The agency intended to release a series of customer-service recommendations this fall based on its private-sector research.

Some of the most striking lessons from the DMV's site visits had little to do with technology, according to CIO Ann Barsotti. "These companies felt that they had some of the best technologies, but they kind of took that for granted. The most important thing they were managing was their resources and their staff."

That finding may translate into a focus on better training for DMV workers, said Mimi Khan, deputy director of the DMV's administrative services division. "We need to concentrate on enhanced education because our employees are the first impact that we have with our customer."

Those employees also may eventually see the DMV's internal systems become easier to use. Barsotti said systems used by employees at retailer Nordstrom were startlingly simply to operate, freeing workers to focus on customer needs.

"When we looked at the transactions that the staff had to do, everything was spelled out for them. They didn't need a cheat sheet to know what a code meant. Everything was entered in English," she said.

That's not currently the case for DMV employees, noted Kahn. "They have to know DMV terminology and they need to have some understanding of our vehicle codes. When I sit down at a field office, someone always has to explain things to me on how to move through the screens."

Also intriguing, she said, are incentives used by companies such as Southwest Airlines to lure customers to Web-based applications. Kahn said the DMV is exploring that option, but she added that meaningful incentives are harder to create for public-sector sites. And Barsotti predicts the agency will place greater emphasis on integrated technology that allows citizens to complete multiple transactions at a single online session.

Although visiting the DMV -- either online or in person -- may never completely match the experience provided by an up-scale retailer, the agency expects lessons learned from customer-service experts to gradually change how the public interacts with the sprawling department.

"There are definitely lessons to be learned," said Kahn. "Any one of these individual things aren't going to make it, but collectively we hope to have a new image for the DMV in the future."